

SEABASING

Expanding Access

By DOUGLAS M. KING and JOHN C. BERRY, JR.



U.S. Navy (Patrick J. Cook)



Merchant Vessel *VADM K.R. Wheeler* is part of Military Sealift Command's off-shore petroleum distribution system

In the 21st century, information can move almost instantaneously around the world via cyberspace, and people can quickly travel great distances by air. The preponderance of materiel, however, still moves the way it has for millennia. Whenever the United States has committed military power beyond its shores, whether to fight foes or assist friends, the vast majority of the U.S. joint force—its equipment, fuel, ammunition, and sustenance—has been transported by sea.

For previous generations, projecting military forces and the resources necessary to support and sustain them overseas was often a hazardous undertaking. Peer

competitors applying their own naval power sought to deny the ocean crossing or, failing that, the landing on the far shore. In the first half of the 20th century, demonstrating considerable foresight and innovation, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps leaders developed the capabilities necessary to establish sea control and project power ashore where and when desired. In the latter half of the same century, the importance of these capabilities waned, as the United States enjoyed the luxury of extensive overseas basing rights, including secure ports and airfields.

In recent years, this network of bases has been dramatically reduced, even as the

United States is confronted by a variety of strategic challenges and locked in a global struggle for influence. The ability to overcome geographic, political, and military impediments to access has reemerged as a critical necessity for extending U.S. influence and power overseas. Fortunately, the United States possesses an asymmetric advantage

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in that endeavor: *seapower*. The American ability to cross wide expanses of ocean and to remain offshore at a time and place and for a duration of its own choosing cannot be contested today to the degree it was in previous eras. Although small in historical terms—and often stretched thin by current operational commitments—the U.S. Navy is, for the foreseeable future, a navy without peer.

This asymmetric advantage means that the Navy-Marine team can use the sea as both maneuver space and a secure operating area to overcome impediments to access. This seabased force—particularly its aircraft carriers and amphibious ships with embarked Marines—is capable of projecting influence and power ashore without reliance on ports and airfields in the objective area. It can do so in a selectively discrete or overt manner to conduct a range of operations—from conducting security cooperation activities, to providing humanitarian assistance, to deterring and, when necessary, fighting wars. This significant advantage does not extend to the joint force as a whole, however. The sealift that transports the preponderance of joint force materiel is still dependent upon secure infrastructure in a potential objective area. Just as the amphibious innovations championed by the Navy and Marine Corps during the 1920s and 1930s benefited the entire joint and Allied force in World War II, the seabasing initiatives being pursued by the Navy-Marine team today are intended to benefit joint, interagency, and multinational teammates.

Unfortunately, seabasing is surrounded by mythology and misunderstanding, and the resulting confusion has stifled capability development. One myth is that seabasing is exclusively intended as a means of providing logistic support for major combat operations. A second myth is that seabasing is synonymous with a discarded concept for modular floating bases. Another misunderstanding is that seabasing is intended as an overly ambitious replacement for (as opposed to a contributing element to) the global network of U.S. bases. Still another is that one specific program, Maritime Prepositioning Force–Future (MPF–F), will satisfy the entire seabasing requirement. Seeking to alleviate this confusion and to promote joint capability development, this article describes the conceptual origins of seabasing, how the concept has evolved to meet the Nation's changing security requirements, and the key initiatives that should allow the

joint force, as well as interagency and multinational partners, to leverage seabasing in support of diverse operations.

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Conceptual Origins

By the end of World War II, the United States possessed an unprecedented ability to fight its way across the oceans and then ashore. The major components of this sea control and power projection capability were the fast attack aircraft carrier force, submarine force, amphibious force, and mobile advanced base force. The scope and impact of the carriers and submarines have been well recognized, but the sheer size and key contribution of the latter two components have been less obvious. By 1945, the United States possessed 2,547 amphibious ships comprising 37.6 percent of the fleet.¹ These ships could deliver an attack from the sea by 13 divisions without reliance on forward land bases.² Similarly, the mobile base force was extraordinarily capable, providing an unrivaled ability to support the fleet's movement through underway replenishment, seabased maintenance facilities, and rapid buildup of advanced bases.

At war's end, however, the United States had vanquished all naval peer competitors, and the role of the Navy and Marine Corps versus the Soviet Union, a nuclear-armed Eurasian land power, was initially unclear. In a frequently quoted 1954 *Proceedings* article, Samuel P. Huntington championed the utility of the Navy and Marine Corps:

With its command of the sea it is now possible for the United States Navy to develop the base-characteristics of the world's oceans to a much greater degree than it has in the past, and to extend significantly the "floating base" system which it originated in World War II The application of naval power against the land requires of course an entirely different sort of Navy from that which existed during the struggles for sea supremacy. The basic weapons of the new Navy are those which make it possible to project naval power far inland. These appear to take primarily three forms. . . . Carrier aviation is sea based aviation; the Fleet Marine Force is a sea based ground force; the guns and guided missiles of the fleet are sea based artillery.³

Huntington's article was prescient but premature. As the Cold War unfolded, U.S. strategy involved the maintenance of a large nuclear arsenal and the basing of significant Army and Air Force formations overseas to deter the Soviet threat. While a growing Soviet navy highlighted the continued

Coast Guard–manned LSTs support operations on Leyte Island, 1944



U.S. Coast Guard

importance of sea control, especially antisubmarine warfare, the emerging naval missions of deterrence, crisis response, and strategic sealift overshadowed power projection. Faced with the need to reinforce forward-based forces, and blessed with the advantage of secure ports and airfields overseas, the United States invested in strategic sealift as opposed to amphibious and mobile base capabilities—an understandable approach under the circumstances. The amphibious ship inventory, which in 1945 had constituted more than a third of the fleet, continually diminished throughout the Cold War until leveling off to where it stands today: roughly 11 percent of the fleet.

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Evolving for a New Era

With the end of the Cold War, the Soviet threat to U.S. maritime supremacy ended, causing the Navy and Marine Corps to reassess their role in a new strategic era. This reassessment echoed Huntington and provided the impetus for resurrecting the seabasing concept, in that the underlying premise of U.S. seapower changed from “the fundamental purpose of naval forces is to achieve command of the seas” to “the fundamental purpose of naval forces is to use command of the seas.”⁴

This change in premise spawned a post-Cold War naval intellectual renaissance, reflected in several Department of the Navy White Papers. The first was *The Way Ahead*, published in 1991, which argued for a new pattern of deployments and force composition to maintain the forward presence required to support humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, nationbuilding, security assistance, peacekeeping, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and crisis response. In 1992, . . . *From the Sea* espoused naval expeditionary operations in the littorals and joint force enabling, and in 1994, *Forward . . . from the Sea* advocated increased flexibility through seabasing.

For more than a decade thereafter, the seabasing concept continued to evolve in a number of documents, including the *Operational Maneuver from the Sea* anthology of concepts published by the Marine Corps in the mid-1990s, followed by *Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare* in 2001, and two editions of *Marine Corps Operating Concepts for a Changing Security Environment*, released in 2005 and 2007. Similarly, the Navy published the *Sea Power 21* series of concepts in late 2002 and early 2003. In addition to the aforementioned Service concepts, seabasing was prominently featured in unified Navy–Marine Corps documents such as *Naval Power 21* in 2002, the *Naval Operating Concept for Joint Operations and Enhanced Networked Seabasing*, both published in 2003, and the *Naval Operations Concept 2006*.

For the most part, these documents described seabasing not as a specific platform—a “thing”—but as an approach for organizing and employing seapower to influence events ashore. The earlier papers touted the advantages of seabased crisis response to provide humanitarian assistance following natural disasters. In later papers, this idea evolved further to advocate seabasing as the means of proactively and discretely projecting soft power.⁵ This theme is highlighted in the recently signed maritime strategy, a tri-Service effort among the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Titled *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, this

strategy can be traced directly back to *The Way Ahead* and reflects more than 16 years of continuous conceptual development concerning the use of naval power to influence events ashore—*seabasing*.

This evolution was not without turmoil, and it occasionally generated misperceptions that persist to this day. As an example, for a time the Department of Defense was greatly concerned about its ability to achieve rapid victory in two nearly simultaneous major combat operations. The Joint Staff concluded that U.S. forces should strive to “seize the initiative” within 10 days, accomplish initial “swiftly defeat” objectives against one enemy within 30 days, and then commence “swiftly defeat” operations against a second enemy in another theater within another 30 days. This became known as the “10–30–30” metric and was subsequently formalized in Strategic Planning Guidance.⁶ This emphasis on strategic speed to conduct multiple major combat operations diverted intellectual focus away from the blend of capabilities required to conduct a range of joint operations. The promising but as yet unproven capabilities of the Maritime Prepositioning Force–Future appeared to offer the only means of achieving the 10–30–30 criteria, resulting in an almost blind faith emphasis on that program as the embodiment of seabasing. This myopia became so extreme that MPF–F came to be seen in some quarters as a replacement for, as opposed to the complement of, amphibious ships.⁷ Even though

Gabonese sailors board USS *Fort McHenry* for maritime security training, Port Gentile, Gabon



U.S. Navy (R.J. Stratchko)

the 10–30–30 criteria proved transitory, the misconception that “MPF–F = seabasing” has proven perniciously enduring.

Another persistent seabasing misunderstanding stems from an initiative once undertaken by the Office of Naval Research (ONR), which explored the feasibility of creating mobile offshore bases (MOB) by assembling semisubmersible modules into a variety of floating bases, to include runways of up to 6,000 feet, as much as 3 million square feet of warehousing, and housing for up to 3,000 troops. The MOB was envisioned as a conduit for resources delivered by strategic sealift and airlift for further transfer ashore by a variety of landing craft. It was determined that the MOB concept was technically feasible but not as cost-effective as existing naval vessels or innovative forms of sealift, such as large medium speed roll-on/roll-off (LMSR) ships.⁸ The unintended consequence of this laudable but stillborn initiative is the belief by some parties that the term *seabasing* is synonymous with the *MOB*.

In spite of these challenges, what began as a naval concept has gained wider Defense Department consensus, formalized with the publication of the *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept* in 2005. This document defines *joint seabasing* as:

the rapid deployment, assembly, command, projection, reconstitution, and re-employment of joint combat power from the sea, while pro-

viding continuous support, sustainment, and force protection to select expeditionary joint forces without reliance on land bases within the Joint Operations Area. These capabilities expand operational maneuver options, and facilitate assured access and entry from the sea.⁹

Interestingly, this document has four supporting concepts of operation (CONOPS) covering the spectrum of operations, from humanitarian assistance to major combat. It is the first of the nine joint integrating concepts to be elaborated on by such CONOPS.¹⁰

Furthermore, in March 2005, the *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* emphasized “the importance of influencing events before challenges become more dangerous and less manageable.”¹¹ It stated that the United States faced a time of great uncertainty and had to address an array of current and potential adversaries who would likely use a combination of traditional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive methods against the United States. The strategy identified the need to enhance eight operational capabilities, many of which appeared to make the case for a seabased approach to a wide range of joint operations:

- strengthening intelligence
- protecting critical bases of operation
- operating from the global commons

- projecting and sustaining forces in distant antiaccess environments
- denying enemies sanctuary
- conducting network-centric operations
- improving proficiency against irregular challenges
- increasing capabilities of international and domestic partners.¹²

The 2005 National Defense Strategy also espoused the necessity of revising the U.S. overseas force posture through a system of main operating bases, forward operating sites, cooperative security locations, and joint seabasing. President George W. Bush noted 2 months later, “We are developing joint sea bases that will allow our forces to strike from floating platforms close to the action, instead of being dependent on land bases far from the fight.”¹³

Global Fleet Station experiments have been conducted with partners in South America and West Africa and have been deemed highly successful

Implementation Initiatives

The Navy and Marine Corps have been involved in a number of seabasing initiatives, both operational and programmatic, which have expanded into joint endeavors. The creation of Global Fleet Stations (GFS), for example, is an operational initiative designed to increase the capability and capacity for discrete, proactive activities as described in the *Naval Operations Concept 2006*: “GFS offers a means to increase regional maritime security through the cooperative efforts of joint, inter-agency, and multinational partners, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations. Like all sea bases, the composition of a GFS depends on Combatant Commander requirements, the operating environment, and the mission.”¹⁴ To date, Global Fleet Station experiments have been conducted with U.S. partners in South America and West Africa and have been deemed highly successful.

The Joint High Speed Vessel (JHSV) is a good example of how Service initiatives have expanded to become joint programs. A Navy-led joint acquisition program, the JHSV combines the Navy–Marine Corps High Speed Connector program with the Army Theater Support Vessel program to



Merchant Vessel 1st Lt. Jack Lummus, of Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Three, supports training in South Korea

U.S. Navy (Lou Rosales)

produce a unified—and more integrated and cost-effective—solution to the commonly shared requirement for intratheater connectors. A shallow draft vessel that can transport personnel, vehicles, equipment, and supplies over operational distances at up to 45 knots, the JHSV has a helicopter flight deck and a vehicle ramp that allow rapid offloading in austere environments. Four experimental vessels have proven highly successful in a variety of assignments, to include supporting the war on terror, Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, disaster relief operations in Indonesia and the U.S. gulf coast, and security cooperation in the Western Pacific.¹⁵

Seabasing initiatives such as these must continue to expand into comprehensive joint and interagency endeavors addressing the spectrum of operations. This will provide a complementary, seagoing component to the system of main operating bases, forward operating sites, and cooperative security locations to overcome challenges to access and better support proactive engagement, crisis response, deterrence, and warfighting. To that end, seabasing must be viewed as an interdependent and interconnected system of systems—everything from major combatants to inshore patrol craft, from surface and aerial connectors to cargo handling gear, and from command suites to medical centers.

Building on the cornerstones provided by amphibious ships and aircraft carriers, the United States must continue to refine its current and emerging platforms to enhance seabasing capability and capacity. Exploration of the MPF-F concept, for example, has identified the ability to conduct at-sea transfer of resources, for both ship-to-ship and ship-to-

shore purposes, as the key enabler for deploying, employing, and sustaining joint forces from the sea. Detailed analysis has concluded that this critical capability can be achieved in a variety of sea states through the combined use of LMSR ships and mobile landing platforms. These initiatives, as well as others yet to be envisioned, will be employed in combination to evolve the capabilities necessary to alleviate the joint force's reliance on shore-based ports and airfields in the objective area.

The Navy-Marine team is already a seabased force capable of conducting a wide spectrum of operations and continues to hone its seabasing capabilities to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Although the preponderance of the joint force benefits from the mobility and capacity provided through seaborne deployment, modern challenges to access negate that advantage. These challenges may be physical, as imposed by remote geography or infrastructure that is austere, damaged by natural disasters, or nonexistent to begin with. In other cases, they may be diplomatic, as even longstanding allies sometimes deny access to ports and airfields ashore for specific operations. There may still be scenarios that will require the United States to fight its way ashore, and adversaries, recognizing the joint force's reliance on secure ports and airfields, will find the scheme of maneuver that much easier to predict and counter. While there is no requirement for the joint team to become as fully seabased as naval forces, the joint team must at least be able to leverage seabasing to reduce reliance on infrastructure ashore and improve access. It is therefore imperative that we pursue joint sea-

basing as the means of not only deploying but also employing and sustaining select joint—as well as interagency and multinational—capabilities from the sea. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Naval Historical Center, *U.S. Navy Active Ship Force Levels*, available at <www.history.navy.mil/branches/org9-4.htm#1938>.

² Robert O. Work, "On Sea Basing," *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the Twenty-first Century*, Naval War College Newport Papers 26 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, February 2006), 112, available at <www.nwc.navy.mil/press/newport-papers/documents/26.pdf>.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, "National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 80, no. 5 (May 1954), 491.

⁴ Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004), 74.

⁵ *Soft power* refers to a state's ability to influence the behavior or interests of another state through cultural or ideological means, as opposed to more direct, coercive means (*hard power*), such as offensive military action. The term was first coined by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) and further developed in his *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁶ Work, 120–123.

⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸ See "Mobile Offshore Base" at <www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/mob.htm>.

⁹ *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept*, Version 1.0 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, August 1, 2005), 5.

¹⁰ The others are combating weapons of mass destruction; joint urban operations; persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; joint logistics; network-centric operational environment; command and control; Global Strike; and joint forcible entry operations. The joint integrating concepts are available at <www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/jic.htm>.

¹¹ Donald H. Rumsfeld, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 1, 2005), iii.

¹² Ibid., 12–16.

¹³ George W. Bush, commencement address at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, May 27, 2005.

¹⁴ Michael G. Mullen and Michael W. Hagee, *Naval Operations Concept 2006* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, September 2006), 17.

¹⁵ See <<http://peoships.crane.navy.mil/JHSV/default.htm>>.

DOD (Robert D. Ward)



ADM Henry Ulrich, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, and GEN William Ward, Commander, U.S. Africa Command, brief Pentagon reporters